

The Much-Bombed Bridge That Planes Never Hit

The following article was written by Seymour M. Hersh, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his reports on the My-Lai massacre in 1968.

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N.Y. Times Service

Thanh Hoa,
North Vietnam

The bridge at Hamrong, for many years a prime target of the air war, is riddled with shrapnel holes and blackened from blasts — but it is still in daily use and has been since the bombing began. For many North Vietnamese the failure of American planes to destroy it is symbolic of what they view as the failure of the air war in general.

Officials in this badly battered area say that Navy and Air Force planes bombed the bridge, which is three miles north of the provincial capital of Thanhhoa, on 1001 days, beginning April 3, 1965, and ending a few days after President Lyndon B. Johnson stopped most bombing on March 31, 1968. More than 3000 tons of bombs were said to have been aimed at the bridge in the period. Most important, officials here claim the downing of 100 planes that were attempting to destroy the bridge.

Most of the claims may not be provable, but military sources in Washington had urged an effort to see the bridge. They said that about 100 planes had been shot down or crippled in the general area.

TRAFFIC

The bridge funnels all vehicular and train traffic over Highway 1, the main ground link in North Vietnam. It also crosses the Ma river, a swift-flowing stream that stretches from Laos to the South China Sea.

In view of the tactical importance of the bridge, it was a target that many pilots wanted to attack. In "Air War," a comprehensive 1967 study of fliers in Vietnam, the author, Frank Harvey, quotes an officer as saying that "Just about every gung ho pilot in both the Air Force and Navy had taken a crack" at the bridge.

The open-work steel-girder bridge, low and unprepossessing, is less than 200 feet in length and not more than 15 feet wide — just enough for trains and pedestrians. Most of its girders sag or have been twisted out of shape by rocket strikes. Wood planks lie among the tracks. A separate pedestrian walk was torn up at the start of the air war to reduce the target.

RUINS

The bridge stands out simply because it is the only steel, wood or brick structure within half a mile. Everything else in the area was bombed by 1968 and is still in ruins.

A rusty locomotive lies along the tracks a few yards south of the bridge, the victim of an early bomb. Dozens of burnt-out boxcars and flat-bed cars litter the area, indicating that the bombers did not always miss. A few bricks along part of a wall are all that remains of a large power station, built

Killing Postponed In Argentine Kidnap

Buenos Aires

Marxist guerrilla kidnapers of Italian businessman Oberdan Sallustro yesterday extended their deadline for his execution until midnight tonight.

In a "Robin Hood" gesture, they insisted that Sallustro's firm, the Fiat Motor Co., deliver \$1 million worth of shoes, notebooks, pencils and other supplies to some 300,000 children in 800 schools in poor areas of the country.

The latest communique indicated that the guerrillas of the People's Revolutionary Army may waive other conditions for Sallustro's release.

Although the kidnapers said their original seven points — including release of 50 jailed guerrillas — still stand, they described Fiat's willingness to meet their demands as of "great worth to the people."

In the face of adamant government refusal to release the guerrillas and also a group of jailed union leaders — reiterated last night for the third time, by Justice Minister Ismael Bruno Quijano — many observers believed the guerrillas might release their prisoner as soon as they are satisfied that Fiat is carrying out their conditions.

Reuters

after the war with the French. Other factory sites are similarly in ruins.

The most substantial objects in the area are two hills, one on each side of the Ma, that provide much of the solid bracing for the bridge. The bridge was completed in 1964 with only one foundation — eight more were added after the bombings began, each in concrete with a diameter of at least three feet.

Pilots soon learned that a near-miss hardly made the bridge shimmy. A direct hit was needed, and despite the intensity of the raids and the equipment of the planes, none were made.

SAVED

A senior Than Hoa province official gave one explanation for the failure: "The bridge was saved not because of its steel and concrete but because of men."

The official, who asked not to be named, said militia for factories and farms put up such a vicious barrage of anti-aircraft fire — beginning miles away from the bridge — that pilots daring to make a direct run along the highway were invariably shot down.

the heavy fire and did not shift the angle of attack.)

TECHNICAL

Government spokesmen at Than Hoa also challenged the view, widely held by American military men, that the anti-aircraft gunners simply sprayed fire indiscriminately into an assigned area in the hope that a plane would fly into it. "We teach them to aim at the plane, a source said, adding that one of the most overlooked aspects of the air war was the constant attempt by the defenders to stay abreast of United States technical advances.

"Our people needed continuous education and training as each new warplane and weapon came into use," he said. "We practiced every week even during the heavy raids, to learn about the latest U.S. equipment."

The official then listed the American planes that attacked the bridge — A-6A, F-105, F-4, F-4D, A-4D, F-8U, A-3J, and C-130.

The C-130, a cargo plane, made only two appearances during the air war, the official said. In May, 1966, he related, one dumped six 1.8-ton mines into the river, about 750 feet upstream, but night guards at the bridge "jumped into the river, swam to the mines and held them in place until technicians could come and defuse them." Four days later, he added, a C-130 was shot down about 20 miles west of the bridge.

MAGNETIC

The next year, the official

said, delayed - fuse magnetic bombs, set to explode when near metal, were dumped in vast quantities along the river and in surrounding communities, apparently in an attempt to harass the defenders.

"It created difficulties at first for the nearby farmers who wanted to cross the river to work adjoining fields," the source said, "but after the first few incidents we learned how to neutralize them — and then taught all the farmers how."

Like every other senior official interviewed, Ho of the war crimes commission had an account of the capture of American pilots. He said he witnessed the destruction of an aircraft flown by Commander Jeremiah A. Denton Jr., of Virginia Beach, Va., and Lieutenant William M. Tschudy, also of Virginia Beach, both of the Navy.

In the account, provided through an interpreter, Ho said:

"When they dived at the bridge they were hit by anti-aircraft fire. So Denton ejected and opened his parachute — it was colored red — and landed right in the river about 100 yards down-

stream from the bridge. The militiamen and women ran to the water and jumped in a boat: others just plunged into the river.

"Tschudy landed on a coconut tree and stayed there, so the people came and pulled him down. He was about 400 or 500 yards from the bridge.

"The plane was an intruder. When they were hit during the dive they had no chance to come up. The Navy did organize a rescue mission and sent more planes, but because of the intensity of fire they stopped."

Both men suffered injuries, Ho said, but they were not considered serious.